

# Mystical Significance of Hair

## - Part 1

Kabbalah teaches that hair is recognized for its spiritual power

From the teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria; translated and edited by Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky



### **Kabbalah teaches that hair is recognized for its spiritual power**

For purposes of clarity, this commentary has been divided into three sections. The first section deals with practices, the second explores spiritual insights, and the third offers meditation instructions and a conclusion.

#### **Section I: Practices**

Before we explore the spiritual insights of the Arizal's teaching, we need first to understand what, in practice, our options are. We will start first with an examination of Halacha (Jewish Law) and then discuss Kabbalistic and Chassidic practices rooted largely in the teachings of the Arizal. (See [part 2](#) of this presentation.)

According to Jewish Law, women are permitted to shave their own facial hair (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah* 181:12), and to shave the sides of their head (*Ibid.* 181:6). Women are not allowed to shave (with a razor) any Jewish man's beard or *peyot*, i.e. side locks (*Ibid.*). According to some authorities, men are permitted to trim or completely shave their beard with either a scissors or an electric shaver that employs a scissor-like cutting mechanism (*Ibid.* 181:3,10 and *Har Tzvi*, Y.D. 143). These lenient authorities maintain that the Torah's prohibition applies only to using a razor in the prohibited zones on the man's beard and head (*Makot* 20A, *Rambam*, *Avodat Kochavim* 12:6).

A man may allow his hair to grow in a moderate way, as long as: there is no impediment due to hair thickness to his putting on the head *Tefillin*, he does not wear long hair to emulate women, and his hairstyle does not follow uniquely gentile fashions. When a man or a woman gets a haircut, or a man trims or shaves his beard, each should have this done by a person of the same sex..

**A man should keep the hair of his head short, with the exception of course of the *peyot* and beard...**

Kabbalistic and Chasidic practice don't avail themselves of these lenient halachic opinions (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah* 181:3 see *Veyesh Osrin* & 181:11 and the Arizal quoted above), and so Kabbalistic principles differs in the following ways:

1. A man does not shave, nor permit others to shave, his beard at all, with the exception of the mustache

that overlaps the top lip, and this is only to be trimmed to above the lip with a scissors. (Writings of the Ari, *Taamei Hamitzvot, parashat Kedoshim*)

2. According to some, a man does not allow his *peyot*, i.e. the hair of his temples and upper sideburns between forehead to back of ears (i.e. sides of the head) to be trimmed (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 181:11*) except when the *peyot* extend past the length of the beard and then are trimmed with a scissors. (Writings of the Ari, *Ta'amei Hamitzvot, parashat Kedoshim*)

3. A man should keep the hair of his head short (*Ibid.*), with the exception of course of the *peyot* and beard.

## Section II: Spiritual Insights

The path of Kabbala is a profound, yet subtle spiritual path, nestled within the heart of Torah. The mitzvot explored here will distinguish clearly between a person, whose commitment to Torah is limited to the keeping of the letter of the Divine Law, and a person whose commitment soars to the level of passionate harmony with the spirit of the Divine Law.

**The path of Kabbala...  
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passionate harmony with  
the spirit of the Divine  
Law.**

Any part of the natural order can be perceived in a variety of ways. Hair, the subject of our exploration here, is no exception. For a scientist, hair is seen and understood in terms of its function in the human body; for a swimmer, in terms of its implications on the speed of the race; and for an advertising executive, as an instrument to attract customers. All these perspectives are understandable, yet far removed from how a Torah practitioner and Kabbalist relates to hair.

The Kabbalist, analogous to the scientist, is interested in understanding hair's spiritual dimension and function. Analogous to the swimmer, he is interested in how hair allows him to maneuver through the spiritual realm. Given the nature of hair, in what way does it obstruct the spiritual journey; in what way can it expedite it? The Kabbalist, like the advertising executive, is interested in attracting divine spiritual abundance and seeks to promote practices that facilitate that aim. These parallels reflect the statement of King Solomon, "One opposite the other did G-d make." ([Ecclesiastes 7:14](#)) The wise will understand.

Many people today experience and relate to their hair as an important expression of their self and something that is integral to their self-esteem. Thus for moderns, it should be reiterated that the Torah gracefully allows them to keep their hairstyles. This is the case provided the hairstyles conform with basic Torah norms of modesty and with the laws relating to shaving and haircuts that we have seen above and will explain later. There is an element of the Torah, the Tree of Life, that makes space for a spectrum of people who are all in different places along the spiritual path. The disciple of Kabbala, representing the epitome of spiritual

aspiration in Torah, seeks from the depths of Torah a way of relating to hair that brings greater spiritual purpose, understanding and maturation.

What is first made clear in the Arizal's teaching is that all hair, whether that of a man or a woman, has besides any physical qualities and psychological significance a distinct spiritual quality. This quality for a man and a woman are different in degree but not in kind. However, whether for men or for women, this quality can actually be different in kind, as we see with the attainment of the nazerite. The nazerite's hair is transformed from the quality of *din* (judgment) to that of *rachamim* (mercy) by their ascetic and spiritual practices. This transformation of the hair from *din* to *rachamim* explains the commandment (Num. 6:5) upon the nazerite to grow his hair long and thus to manifest the supernal *rachamim* latent within the divine persona (*partzuf*) of *Atik Yomin* that he has come to, in miniature, be expressed through their hair.

Initially, students of Kabbala need to develop this sensitivity to hair's spiritual quality and then they can start developing their appreciation for the Arizal's understanding and mappings of these various gradations of hair and the directives that follow from them.

First, it should be said that Kabbala has a complex yet ultimately simple understanding of G-d. Accordingly, it calls upon us to emulate, and, so to speak, embody, a greater range of divine personas, or in proper Kabbalistic terminology, *partzufim*. In other words, in Torah (*Rambam, Sefer Mitzvot*, Mitzvah 8) we are bidden to emulate G-d in terms of specific character traits, all having their specific parallels in the *sefirot* (*Tomer Devorah*). So too here, we are called to touch a more subtle dimension of G-d's *manifestation* of Himself in creation and our psyche.

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The Arizal, in the teaching above, refers to three *partzufim*: *Nukva*, *Zeir Anpin* and *Arich Anpin*. Here, we will deal with the first two, given that the nazerite's vow is not desirable for most contemporary Jews. (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 203:7)

"*Nukva*" is Aramaic for "female", and is also known as the *Shechina* (indwelling Divine Presence). It is a feminine/receptive dimension of the Creator's *sefirotic* personality, so to speak. *Nukva* corresponds to the *sefira* of *malchut*. How does the Kabbala reconcile the concepts of femininity and kingship equally associated with *Nukva*? Quite simply, Kabbala sees monarchy as depending on a kingdom, something that can only be given to the King, in a desired fashion, through the willing reception on the part of a people of the kingdom. Thus, it is said about *Nukva/malchut*, "There is no King without a nation" (*Kad HaKemach*, Rosh Hashanah Ayin, *alef*). *Nukva* is also as referred to as "*bat*" ("daughter") or "*Knesset Yisrael*" ("the Community of Israel") and represents the collective soul of the Jewish people. Although *Nukva* is receptive/feminine to the G-dly dimensions above, it is active/masculine in relation to those below it.

"*Zeir Anpin*" is Aramaic for "Small Face" and represents the small face of G-d. *Zeir Anpin* is how G-d

appeared to the Jewish people in the image of a young warrior with black hair. (See *Sha'ar Hakavanot*, *Inyan Chag Hashavuot*, for quotation of famous Midrash.) This prophetic glimpse of divine imagery was perceived at the crossing of the Red Sea when the Egyptians were drowned. It is possible that this dimension of G-d is seen as the small face because it does not reflect the wholeness of the divine intention in relation to Creation. Rather, it is but a small dimension of the Creator's *sefirotic* projection. *Zeir Anpin* is also known as "Holy One, blessed be He" and is a masculine/active dimension of the Creator's *sefirotic* persona. *Zeir Anpin* is known as "*ben*" ("son") and is associated with the six *sefirot* of *chesed*, *gevura*, *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod* and *yesod*.

Before we explain the nature of the hair of *Zeir Anpin* and *Nukva*, it is necessary to first explain the concept of hair as it pertains to the *partzufim*. First, though, it needs to be said that each *partzuf* is composed of ten *sefirot*, which have both *Mochin* (consciousness) and *middot* (attributes). In name, the *Mochin* are: *keter*, *chochma*, *bina* and the *middot* are: *chesed*, *gevura*, *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod* and *yesod*. *Malchut*, as we have said, is receptive. These *sefirot* are depicted by analogy to a human like form. Thus hair is also part of the human being and is viewed as reflective of the divine hair. One could look at our hair as being a poor analogy of the "real" divine hair. The hair of the *partzufim* is said to originate in the excess of the *Mochin*'s processing and receptivity of the divine light from the *Ein Sof*. (*Otzrot Chaim*, *Derush Adam Kadmon*, pg. 6)

The hair of *Nukva* and of *Zeir Anpin* have the quality of judgment (*din*). Yet, *Nukva*, associated with the woman, is of a less severe quality and is only in need of being covered. This covering of the female's hair in Jewish law, applies to married, divorced, or widowed women. In Kabbalistic practice these women's hair are meant, within the bounds of practicality, to be covered entirely, and to be covered, ideally, nearly always with the exception of bathing.

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[Note: See *Zohar*, *parashat Naso* 125b -126b, regarding spiritual importance and ramifications of women not covering their hair both at home and outside. See *Magen Avraham*, *Orach Chaim* 75:2 regarding extent that hair should be covered according to *Zohar*; also see *Chatam Sofer*, *Orach Chaim* 36; also *Igrot Moshe*, *Even HaEzer*, vol. I, 58 for strict and lenient Halachic views. See *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 21:2 and *Bayit Chadash* on *Tur ad loc.* for requirement of hair coverings for women who are: married, divorced, widowed or single if not virgins. For this last inclusion, see *Mishna Berura*, *Orach Chaim* 75:11, *Helkat Mechokek*, Letter 2 and *Shevut Yaakov* vol. I, 103. There is room for leniency here from for widows, divorcees, and presumably single women. See *Igrot Moshe Even HaEzer*, vol. I, 57 and more so *Igrot Moshe Even HaEzer*, sect. 32 par. 4. In practice, one is advised to ask one's local Rav. There are stricter opinions see *Yabia Ohem* 4:3.]

A man's hair, though, is of a different variety. His judgments (*din*) expressed on the hair of most of his head, with exception of the sideburns (*peyot*), are considered in need of nearly complete elimination. This especially is the case if his soul is rooted in the distinctly aggressive dimension of the super-soul-root of Cain, the killer of his brother Abel. In the context of what has been said in regards to woman, the message is clear. A man,

who is an embodiment of *Zeir Anpin*, needs to remove his judgments, i.e. hairs of most of his head, in order to rectify his nature. Men, it should also be noted also cover their hair (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 2:6 and see *Shabbat* 156b) and contrary to much popular lay opinion, this head covering is ideally supposed to cover the majority of his skull (*Igrot Moshe Orach Chaim* 1:1). Nor should a man walk four *amot* (approximately six feet) without a head covering, or make a blessing without a head covering (Ibid.). In particular, Kabbalists wear especially large head coverings, almost equaling those of women's requirement.

Not so the hair of the man's beard. Here we are instructed that a man's beard represents channels for divine abundance and reflect supernal G-dly qualities of kindness and trust, which men are called to embody. With regards to the man's beard, he is encouraged to let it grow unhindered. Here there is also the need for sensitization that beard hair is not something to pull, when debating a Talmudic argument, or to comb, for the cultivation of even a spiritual neatly kept image. Rather, a man is called to a radical experience of what Job stated, "From my flesh I will see G-d." ([Job 19:26](#)) We can explain this verse as referring to the experience of the spiritual and G-dly potential in the human body.

When the Arizal teaches that the hair of the head is of the quality of judgment, perhaps this is also tacit recognition, in one respect, of the intimate association of hair with ego. For anyone living in the Western world such a connection between hair and ego is beyond need of demonstration. Likewise, is the understanding nothing more than ego

**A woman, who expresses the divine persona of *Nukva*, is...embodiment of a tamed force of judgment in this world...**

limits a person. The hair of the head, located as it is on the top of the human body, can be perceived as the *kefer* (literally "crown") of negative human ego. Interestingly, a woman, who expresses the divine persona of *Nukva*, is required to cover her hair on the head but is not to eliminate it. In actuality, the opposite is true. She is discouraged from making herself hairless, given the need for her embodiment of a tamed force of judgment in this world. Women are rooted in the left side of the Tree of Life and correspond to the *gevura*. Her *gevura* needs to be contained but not eliminated. Men are rooted in the Right side of the Tree of Life, and find their source in the *chasadim*; therefore, their *gevurot/dinim*, i.e. the hair of their heads, needs to be eliminated largely but not completely.

How is it that our hair has come to embody the quality of judgment? And is this the way of responding to this reality? Kabbala explains that anything with a dominant quality of judgment, like hair, is inherently vulnerable to exposure and damage from the "Other Side" i.e. Evil. That there is evil in the world and that the world is in such a spiritually collapsed state of existence is a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. (*Derech Hashem* 1:3:8) Needless to say, before their fall Adam and Eve did not cover their hair, as they were both naked (Gen. 2:25), free of sexual lust and ego. (See *Guide for the Perplexed*, ch. 2)

We, as fallen human beings seeking redemption, need to respect the situation that we, as part of archetypal Adam and Eve, have collectively created. We need to work with this reality towards *Tikun*. Abrogating the

covering of one's hair, for a man or a woman, in the present time, in the name of feminism or some preemptive neo-messianic spirit, when evil has yet to be eradicated, feeds the "Other Side" with exactly what it desires: the power of judgments. The Zohar states quite clearly that when we *expose* the judgments below, we cause a descent of the judgments above, in *Nukva* and *Zeir Anpin*, into this world below. These then later wreak havoc on our lives.

In the words of the Zohar: "Disruption of spiritual consciousness will befall a man who allows his wife to expose her hair; this [the proper covering of a woman's hair] is one of the foundational principles of modesty. A woman who let's her hair be seen in order to appear attractive causes poverty to her home, spiritual inferiority to her children and causes a negative spiritual influence to reside in the home... If all this in one's own house certainly in public places and certainly other brazen acts of immodesty...."(Zohar, *parashat Naso* 125b-126b)

### Section 3: Meditation Instructions

When a man is beginning to have his haircut, he should intend:

1. To fulfill the will of his Maker in not having the corners of his head shaved with a razor.
2. To fulfill the will of his Maker in not having his beard cut by a razor.

Besides these preparatory meditations, he can intend:

1. To remove the judgments from his head to the extent that he does.
2. To do the meditation while reflecting on the above *gematria* of the word "*ta'ar*" ("razor"- see Part 1) and name of G-d.

Throughout the day, a man can attune to his beard, as an expression of the divine names *E-I Sha-Dai*. This should not be done in the bathroom or an unclean place. While contemplating, a person can focus on opening his heart in kindness, and developing his inner strength, thus becoming more truly trusted as a vessel for the Divine Will.

A woman, when putting on her hair-covering, can intend to conceal and sweeten her judgments. She can also contemplate ways in which she can appropriately manifest her inborn quality of *gevura*. Hair, as a clearly sexual dimension of her existence, can suggest a meditation focused on the partial concealment of her physical self so that her spiritual self can illuminate creation with greater clarity.

The goal of the Kabbala is the transformation of a human being into a chariot for the Divine. Hair, an aspect of our existence that has been exiled into banality and perversion, in Kabbala is recognized for its spiritual power, properties and potential. Contemporary Jewish spiritual seekers are encouraged to work with this

Kabbalistic tradition and experiment with its fruits.

Although the experience of Divine Law is at times experienced as an external imposition on the self, experience shows that with the humbling of the heart and the opening of the mind Divine Law, is in actuality a greater, albeit often more concealed, expression of the soul's knowledge and intuitive wisdom.

[Click here for Part Two](#) of this presentation of the Mystical Significance of Hair

[Adapted by Zechariah Goldman from *Taamei Hamitzvot*, Kedoshim]

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Rabbi Yitzchak Luria [...Ashkenazi ben Shlomo] (5294-5332 = 1534-1572 c.e.); Yahrtzeit (anniversary of death): 5th of Av. Buried in the Old Cemetery of Tzfat. Commonly known as the *Ari*, an acronym standing for *Eloki* Rabbi Yitzchak, the G-dly Rabbi Isaac. No other master or sage ever had this extra letter *Aleph*, standing for *Eloki* [G-dly], prefaced to his name. This was a sign of what his contemporaries thought of him. Later generations, fearful that this appellation might be misunderstood, said that this *Aleph* stood for Ashkenazi, indicating that his family had originated in Germany, as indeed it had. But the original meaning is the correct one, and to this day among Kabbalists, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria is only referred to as Rabbenu HaAri, HaAri HaKadosh [the holy Ari] or Arizal [the Ari of blessed memory].

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